

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 041 029

TE 001 961

AUTHOR Mersand, Joseph
TITLE Selection of Adult Books for School-Age Readers.
PUB DATE 68
NOTE 12p.; Reprinted from "Evaluating Books for Children and Young People," Perspectives in Reading, No. 10 (1968), published by the International Reading Association
AVAILABLE FROM Dr. Joseph Mersand, 166-05 Highland Ave., Jamaica, New York 11432 (Free upon receipt of a long self-addressed envelope with first-class postage for each reprint.)
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.25 HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents, Booklists, Criteria, *Evaluation Criteria, Library Material Selection, Literary Discrimination, *Literature, *Reading Material Selection, Secondary Education, *Student Interests, Student Needs, *Teenagers

ABSTRACT

Selection of adult books for teen-age readers should be based on three pertinent factors: (1) interests, ideals, and aspirations of adolescents, (2) acquaintance with the best books of the past and present; and (3) availability of adequate funds. Literature on early book lists generally failed to appeal to young readers. Today, many current and varied guidelines for book selection are provided by books and articles as well as by the Bill of Rights of the American Library Association. A limited survey of librarians and teachers indicated that their criteria for book selection included the excellence of writing and the "reality" in the book. Studies of reading interests of teen-agers revealed that young adults are concerned with the individual, with social problems and responsibility, with contemporary affairs, both national and international, and with the movement into adult life. (A list of book selection references is included.) (JM)

ED041029

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL BY MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY IRA and author TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U. S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

SELECTION OF ADULT BOOKS For School - Age Readers

By

JOSEPH MERSAND, Ph.D.

Head of the English Department
Jamaica High School New York City

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION
& WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED
EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR
ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF
VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECES-
SARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDU-
CATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Reprinted from
EVALUATING BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Perspectives in Reading, No. 10 (1968)

Published by the International Reading Association
Newark, Delaware 19711

Reprinted with permission of the author and I R A

TE001 961

Selection of Adult Books for School-Age Readers

JOSEPH MERSAND

Jamaica High School, New York City

THE DISCUSSION OF this topic is particularly appropriate at this time in our cultural and educational history for several reasons. First, there is an ever-increasing proportion of school-age students compared with the population of our country as a whole. Teenagers, for example, now form an important segment of American consumers for which American businessmen are showing an increasing awareness. Second, books are more available today than ever before in our history, thanks to the omnipresence of paperbacks—good, bad, and indifferent—and to the construction of more public and school libraries. Finally, thanks to the interest of the federal government in improving education at all levels, more funds are now available to librarians to purchase more books and other instructional materials. In fact, two kinds of current complaints from school librarians are unique if one considers the last three decades. One type is the complaint that there is no room to house the many new books which they now have more than ample funds to purchase, and the other, that they have so much money they do not know what to do with it. Twenty years ago, one heard neither.

To formulate any worthwhile criteria for selecting adult books of interest to school-age students requires a knowledge of these three pertinent factors. Those who are responsible for making such selections—whether they are teachers, librarians, or parents—obviously must know something about the interests, ideals, and aspirations of adolescents (here considered as the secondary school students, grades 7 to 12). Knowing the nature of the adolescent, however, is not enough. The selector of adult books must have a rich acquaintance with the best books of the past and the present. He must also have that rare and undefinable quality of “good taste” so as to know what to recommend. The third requisite is the obvious one—availability of adequate funds.

The development of the procedure for recommending adult books for

adolescents has progressed through several stages. At first, such recommendations were made by adults, ostensibly interested in good reading and eager to inspire young people with the same enthusiasm. Booklists have been compiled by experienced teachers, librarians, and bibliophiles, at least for the past seventy-five years and undoubtedly longer. In fact, when the so-called Standard Classics of the 1880's began to dominate secondary school English programs at the end of the nineteenth century and during the first two decades of the twentieth century, there were usually two lists of books recommended—one for intensive class study and the other for individual reading. Publishers then came out with their lists of classics to meet the demands of the College Entrance Examination Board (7). These recommendations for individual reading were, for the most part, literature of the nineteenth century or earlier. Hardly a contemporary book was included.

Lists were later prepared by curriculum committees of state and local school systems. In large city school systems, almost every high school felt it necessary to prepare a list of what came to be universally known as "supplementary reading." I have still retained the *Brooklyn Boys' High School Handbook*, which was purchased in 1920 when I entered, with its substantial list of recommended books, term by term. Many libraries prepared their own lists, and these served as guides to teachers and parents. There has never been a dearth of recommended lists of books for young people. In fact, one or more doctoral dissertations in library science could profitably be written about these recommended lists, their preparation, promulgation, and influence. To my knowledge, this kind of study has not been made, and it should be useful to those who are interested in knowing how to build lasting reading interests in students.

What Early Lists Lacked

The only trouble with the early lists is that, from the evidence offered by the students themselves, the books did not, in the main, appeal to young readers. For every adolescent who developed a life-long interest in books as a result of reading the books on these lists, there must have been a thousand who continued to read trash or nothing at all. Something must have gone wrong, somewhere along the road, between the selectors and the adolescents. What many of the early list-makers failed to take into account was the young reader for whom they were making these recommendations. The intentions were good, but the results were disappointing.

Have Current Principles of Selection Been Improved?

Today, helpful guidelines are available for those who would select suitable

SELECTION OF ADULT BOOKS FOR SCHOOL-AGE READERS

adult books. The Bill of Rights of the American Library Association certainly contains valuable suggestions and lists the following as responsibilities of a school library:

1. To provide materials that will enrich and support the curriculum, taking into consideration the varied interests, abilities and maturity levels of the students served.
2. To provide materials that will stimulate growth in factual knowledge, aesthetic values, and ethical standards.
3. To provide a background of information that will enable students to make intelligent judgments in their daily lives.
4. To provide materials on opposing sides of controversial issues so that young citizens may develop, under guidance, the practice of critical reading and thinking.
5. To provide materials representative of the many religious, ethnic and cultural groups and their contributions to our heritage.
6. To place principle above personal opinion and reason above prejudice in the selection of materials of the highest quality in order to assure a comprehensive collection appropriate for the users of the Library.

While these principles are no doubt unobjectionable, they are far too general to assist the busy librarian who has a great deal of money to spend but too little time to read the thousands of adult books that are suitable for the student readers in her library. Of course, there are easy ways out by consulting such compilations as *Doors to More Mature Reading* (14), or *Books for You* (1), or the *Senior Book list* (6) and *Junior Book List* (5) published annually by the National Association of Independent Schools (Alas, the March 1967 issue of these valuable annual compilations will be the last!), and *Books for the Teen Age* (15) published annually by the Young Adult Division of the New York Public Library for the past twenty or more years. All these and many others can assist the well-intentioned but harassed librarian or teacher or parent in the quest for the best adult books for young readers.

However, some librarians and teachers may ask, when making their selection based upon their own reading and judgment, "What criteria do I follow?"

Here, too, there is help in sight. The first is a series of suggestions on selecting adult novels, taken from Hanna and McAllister's *Books, Young People, and Reading Guidance* (4):

Sometimes young people find adult novels unsatisfying because the content proves dull and uninteresting. The theme may be too mature, the construction too

MERSAND

involved, the style too contemplative, or philosophical, or too weighted with description. Often small print and narrow margins make the format unappealing . . . Many novels are too long, for the adolescent is usually in a hurry and wants books he can finish quickly. After all, there are a great many other things to do besides read and all of them are important and very pressing (4:118).

There is, furthermore, the ever-present problem of the suitability of adult fiction for school-age readers. In this respect, too, Hanna and McAllister offer helpful guidance:

Of the novels that are considered interesting and readable by the adolescent, many are considered unsuitable by his elders. Too often "unsuitable" has not been properly understood either by the adolescent or the adult and so has been interpreted as censorship. Good book selection for young people accepts the fact that adolescents are not adults and therefore do not hold the same perspective or place the same importance on ideas in novels as do adults. For this reason certain incidents in otherwise fine adult novels are often not as harmful to them as many adults think. On the other hand, young people tend to place emphasis where adult readers would not, and too often they miss the real point of what the author is saying and see only the apparent result. The reading of some adult novels, therefore, should be postponed, just as many other experiences of adult life are postponed until there is enough maturity for full understanding. Book selection does not deny any novel to young people, but rather makes available to them a wide variety of more suitable novels, better and more appealing because they reflect the needs and interests of young people on their own level of understanding. Not denial of a book but the provision of something better is a basic principle of book selection (4:119).

What Do the Book Selectors Use as Criteria?

To determine criteria used in selection, sources such as *Books, Young People and Reading Guidance* and numerous articles in the various library journals were consulted. In addition, it seemed profitable to find out what librarians and teachers who have served on book selection committees have used as their criteria. Hence, a letter was sent to all the members of the Committee on Senior Booklist, the Committee on Junior Booklist, to the committee that prepared *3,000 Books for Secondary School Libraries* (9), and *Doors to More Mature Reading*, and to Richard S. Alm, editor of *Books for You*. Their answers, appearing in print for the first time here, represent the latest thinking on this subject and hence merit attention. Those who responded to this limited survey, many of whom answered in considerable detail, deserve profound thanks and appreciation.

SELECTION OF ADULT BOOKS FOR SCHOOL-AGE READERS

Pauline Anderson, Librarian of the Andrew Mellon Library of The Choate School, Wallingford, Connecticut and a member of the N.A.I.S. Committee that compiled *3,000 Books for Secondary School Libraries* mentions the following as basic principles, in addition to the American Library Association's Bill of Rights already mentioned:

1. No books in the "gray areas" of acceptable taste to be included.
2. Materials of literary value to be chosen.
3. The authors of the selected books to be the best authorities in their fields available at the time.
4. Materials hinging on the sensational side to be avoided.
5. In case of translations, the most accurate ones to be selected.
6. No book to be included which would not contribute to the academic, moral, or personal growth of the individual student.

Mrs. Locke K. Brown of the Springside School, Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, reveals the criteria employed by the Committee on Senior Booklist of the N.A.I.S.:

Generally, the criteria for evaluating these books include excellence of writing and some relationship to the student's actual, vicarious, or potential experience. Thus, for example, Molly Mahood's *Joyce Cary's Africa* was rejected by the committee, because, although it was itself excellent and a real contribution to the understanding of Cary, it was too specialized to be of general interest at the high school level.

Without departing from these guidelines, indeed consistent with them, we may list a book which appears on the surface to be racy, and for which we have occasionally been criticized. The point in this instance should be made that the committee does not reject a book merely because it is racy. If sordidness or violence plays an integral part in an artistically viable and significant book, then the committee has no objection to it. On that basis, for example, the committee included Jesse Hill Ford's *Liberation of Lord Byron Jones*. For failing to meet these standards, the committee rejected a very bad novel, *The Beasts*, by Leslie Garrett, because it was vicious with no objective other than being so.

In all of this, of course, it must be remembered that the student body of a demanding school has a great deal of freedom in what it reads, both in its leisure and in its curriculum. It can be relied on to exercise a full degree of discrimination and critical judgment. Because of this, it can read certain books with profit that would be devastating to less able students. This is a particularly important aspect of what I mean when I say that we choose books in some relationship to student experience. Because the experience, as far as training and judgment are concerned, is relatively wide, so can the selection be broad.

MERSAND

Although Mrs. H.L. Richardson of the Committee on Senior Booklist did not suggest any criteria, she commented with insight on the reading of adolescents in this way:

I think the one thing important to adolescents in their reading is reality. They are anxious to know how the world really is and how other people solve their problems. This explains, I think, the popularity of *The Diary of a Young Girl* (by Anne Frank) and *Death Be Not Proud* with young people. They certainly do not want to read that strange breed of book, the teenage novel—a book of dating problems written about teenagers for teenagers by adults who are still children.

Because they are looking for answers, books of controversy and books expressing views not generally held by their parents and teachers are interesting to adolescents. I have the feeling that although the adolescent has had more thoughtful attention from adults in this generation than in previous ones, he has also had less understanding and comprehension.

Elinor Walker, Coordinator of Work With Young People and one of the compilers of *Doors to More Mature Reading*, has some revealing comments on the criteria which she uses for the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh:

It always amuses me to hear young teachers who indiscriminately recommend Faulkner and his ilk to teenage readers say that librarians are trying to protect young readers from the facts of life. I wonder if they think that teenagers live in a vacuum. Actually, the seamy side of life is thrown at them from every direction. Some magazines, many newspapers, radio and most TV, theatre and movies are concerned with little else.

My theory and practice have always been to buy only books which have some positive value. Any negative qualities have to be *far* outweighed by the positive. We buy some books which we know are mediocre as far as writing goes, but this is justified by contents which have something worthwhile to say to the young person. No matter how beautifully a book may be written, we do not buy it if it has nothing to say to teenage readers. Some books are too nostalgic or too far outside the young people's experience to be appreciated by them. I think it is important that books give young people some assurance that there is good in the world, and that it often triumphs over evil. I maintain that realism includes the good as well as the bad, although many people do not agree with me.

You will note in the Preface to *Doors* we said that we chose books "that bring challenges to young people, that widen their horizons, and that deepen their appreciation of language, of truth, of beauty, of life itself."

We often refuse to buy some of the titles recommended by ALA as being appropriate for teenage readers. We do not buy a new title on a subject just because it is a new title. If it does not add anything to what we already have, we think it is not

SELECTION OF ADULT BOOKS FOR SCHOOL-AGE READERS

worth buying. We have teenage readers who review books for us and discuss them at reviewing meetings, and we find they are more choosy than we are. *We* do have to keep the slower, poorer reader in mind.

I am sure that I have not said anything new or startling. We used these same criteria in selecting books for *Doors*. For that publication we had the advantage of having tested everything with our readers, and we knew what their reactions were to the titles we chose. That is one reason we have teenagers help review new books here in Pittsburgh.

Donald W. Allyn, another member of the committee that compiled *Doors to More Mature Reading*, made the following statement of principles that guided the members of this committee as well as those who compiled its companion volume, *Book Bait* (13):

In the preface to *Book Bait*, the companion volume to *Doors to More Mature Reading*, is the statement that the books included not only "give lasting pleasure, but they also contribute to the growth and understanding of the young people who read them. They help in building a sound philosophy of life, and they offer some of the knowledge, tolerance, and courage which will enable young people to face their problems with a determination to solve them." I like to think that there is no such thing as a "young adult book." There are thousands of books, some of which young people like to read and which contribute something to their particular stage of development. Identifying these books is a matter of listening and watching to find out which titles are duds and which are demanded year after year. When we put together *Doors*, we were combining our collective opinions about books which we knew appealed to some young people and which could be introduced to other teenagers with a good chance of success. When a new book is published, the librarian reviewing it may sense that it will or will not appeal to young adults, but its true test comes when the students pick it up.

What Are the Reading Interests of Young People?

Throughout, mention has been made of the reading interests of the school-age reader; the remainder of this article will be devoted to this topic. Perhaps the most extensive investigations of this subject are those made by George W. Norvell over a period of twenty-five years. In 1950, he published his *Reading Interests of Young People* (10), in which more than 50,000 students and 625 teachers participated from all types of communities of New York State. In all, 1,700 selections widely used in secondary schools were listed in the order of choice by boys and girls of grades 7 to 12. In 1958, Norvell published *What Boys and Girls Like to Read* (11), in which he studied the opin-

MERSAND

ions of 24,000 students in grades 3 to 6. The statistics are probably the most impressive of any similar study.

Whereas Norveli's studies are valuable for their statistical significance, there have been complementary studies of the adolescent's reading tastes that should be helpful in the search for criteria. Space will permit mention of only a few of them. In the January 1965 issue of *Top of the News* (12), Helen Wilmot of the Young Adult Services Division Board of the American Library Association describes the results of a questionnaire addressed to senior high school students who were leaders in sports, in honor societies, or of other groups within the school. The question asked was phrased as follows:

Because we feel the above to be true (the quotation from Aldous Huxley used to end this article) we thought it would be fun and interesting to have you tell us what books or books have influenced you. We are asking your opinion because, though still in your teens, you have already shown traits of leadership and have the respect and good will of your fellow students (12:143).

Over 3,000 questionnaires were returned from 138 areas. Of these, 700 came from non-leaders of the schools. Although 3,000 replies may not represent the viewpoints of millions of teenagers, nevertheless, they do represent the groups surveyed. As Miss Wilmott analyzed the findings, she found that young adults are primarily concerned with three areas:

1. The individual—his growth, personality, and philosophy. This may be brought out through character development in fiction; religiously and ethically, as in the Bible and Gibran's *The Prophet*; through ideas set forth by the "great minds" of all time or through career-based fiction and nonfiction. Basically, this is the teenager's search to find himself. . . .
2. He has concern for social problems and social responsibility, whether it be the great national concern of Civil Rights or the problem of the mentally retarded, the alcoholic, or the juvenile delinquent.
3. He is concerned for the world he lives in on both the national and the international levels, and he often shows a deep interest in and appreciation for his American heritage. He often mentioned that what he has read has given him a determination to do something about a situation—if only to better inform himself (12:144).

Those of us who have been teaching for the past few years and have read the literature dealing with adolescents' reading interests may find nothing

particularly new about the three above-mentioned points. They have been found in the literature of at least the past three decades. What is of interest is that conclusions of the 1930's are still found to be valid in the 1960's. Thus, despite all the apparent changes in behavior, dress, social activities, and attitudes of today's adolescents, basically their reading interests have not changed noticeably in the past thirty years; and they will probably not change much in the next three decades. This fact ought to be of some comfort to the teacher or librarian who has to make long-range purchases.

The most recent publication covering the entire range of literature for school-age readers is G. Robert Carlsen's *Books and the Teen-Age Reader* (2). Professor Carlsen is one of the most knowledgeable experts in this field, and his book is the most useful guide to teachers, librarians, and parents available today. Understanding both the nature of the reading experience and having a rich acquaintance with literature on all levels of both the past and the present, he has provided a handbook that answers the question raised in this paper, as well as many other related questions. His Chapters 6, "The Popular Adult Book," and 9, "The Place of the Classics," contain a wealth of practical suggestions with many specific titles at the end of each chapter. It is the kind of book that can be read and reread and will continue to enrich the reader and provide deeper insights into this fascinating area. In addition, Professor Carlsen's address given at the American Library Conference in St. Louis, July 2, 1964, is reprinted in the January 1965 issue of *Top of the News* (3). The article, which is written with his usual clarity and perceptiveness, is entitled, "For Everything There Is A Season" (3). It is valuable because it describes both the reading habits and the reading content of adolescents. Rarely has so much good sense based on sound scholarship been expressed in so few pages. In a certain degree, his book is an amplification of this discussion. The four areas of content are quite familiar to those who have had much to do with developing the reading interests of adolescents. The topics are

1. *The Search*. Young adults choose books in which individuals are looking for a direction for their lives . . .
2. *Problems of the Social Order*. Just as young people are involved with their own personal problems, they are also concerned with the problems of their society. . .
3. *The Bizarre, the Off Beat, The Unusual in Human Experience*. Apparently, in looking for direction, the young adult is curious about the fringes of human life. . .
4. *The Transition*. Perhaps the single theme most sought by the young adult is the book that details the movement of a character from adolescence into early adult life (3:106-108).

These four areas of content happen to be the most popular, but there are many more. Luckily, there now is a much greater understanding of both literature for adolescents and their tastes in literature than was true in the past.

How To Know the Best

The words "taste in literature" raise the question as to how teachers or librarians can be sure of showing the best taste. Here a field of inquiry is opened that goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics* and has by no means ended with the New Criticism. More than a quarter of a century ago when I was asked to discuss the subject "What Makes Great Drama Great?" my criteria eventually became a chapter in *The Play's the Thing* (8). Although these were originally intended for selecting plays, they are just as applicable to other literary genres:

1. Universality of appeal, in time as well as space.
2. Creation of living characters in convincing situations.
3. The play must stir, move, enrich, or transform you.
4. The language of a great play is superior to one that is inferior.
5. Great plays, in common with great literature of all varieties, will teach you about life, how people think, act, and should strengthen your hand in facing your life problems.

These five simple criteria have helped many a teacher and librarian and hopefully may continue to do so.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to present some of the major problems involved in selecting adult books for school-age students by demonstrating some of the principles that have been used for the past seventy-five years. Some of these principles have never succeeded in accomplishing their purpose. The more successful practices have been revealed by actual practitioners in the field of book selection. With a better knowledge of the adolescent's interests and a richer acquaintance with literature of both past and present, perhaps individuals can succeed in achieving the goal so well expressed by Aldous Huxley, "Every man who knows how to read has it in his power to magnify himself, to multiply the ways in which he exists, to make his life full, significant and interesting" (quoted in 12:143).

SELECTION OF ADULT BOOKS FOR SCHOOL-AGE READERS

REFERENCES

1. Alm, Richard S. (Ed.). *Books for You*. New York: Washington Square, 1964.
2. Carlsen, G. Robert. *Books and the Teen-Age Reader*. New York: Harper, 1967.
3. Carlsen, G. Robert. "For Everything There Is A Season," *Top of the News*, 21 (January 1965), 103-110.
4. Hanna, Geneva R., and Marianna K. McAllister. *Books, Young People and Reading Guidance*. New York: Harper, 1960.
5. Markey, Lois R., Compiler. *Junior Book List*. Boston: National Association of Independent Schools, 1967.
6. Markey, Lois R., Compiler. *Senior Books List*. Boston: National Association of Independent Schools, 1967.
7. Mersand, Joseph. "The Teaching of Literature in American High Schools, 1865-1900," in Robert C. Pooley (Ed.), *Perspectives on English*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960, 269-302.
8. Mersand, Joseph. *The Play's the Thing*. New York: Modern Chapbooks, 1948, 23-39.
9. National Association of Independent Schools, *3000 Books for Secondary School Libraries*. New York: Bowker, 1961.
10. Norvell, George W. *The Reading Interests of Young People*. Boston: D.C. Heath, 1950.
11. Norvell, George W. *What Boys and Girls Like to Read*. New York: Silver, Burdett, 1958.
12. Wilmott, Helen. "YASD Asks the Young Adult," *Top of the News*, 21 (January 1965), 143-147.
13. Walker, Elinor (Ed.). *Book Bait: Detailed Notes on Adult Books Popular with Young People*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1957.
14. Walker, Elinor, and Others (Eds.). *Doors to More Mature Reading*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1964.
15. Young Adult Services. *Books for the Teen Age 1966-1967*. New York: New York Public Library, 1967.